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The Need of English Translations of the Sagas and the Masterpieces
of Modern Scandinavian Literature.¹

MR. CHAIRMAN AND GENTLEMEN :—

The purposes of such an organization as ours naturally fall into three groups: first, the investigation of problems in Scandinavian languages, literatures, and cultural history and the publication of the results of such investigation; second, the promotion of the study of Scandinavian languages and literatures in American schools, colleges and universities; and third, the spread of Scandinavian cultural influences among the American public. To this last branch of our work I wish to call your attention.

I scarcely need mention the benefit it would bring to our American life, and the necessity we are under of broadening our own views and of adding to our stock of national culture all the good that we can obtain from foreign lands. In this respect the work of our society would be distinctly popular and its members would act as missionaries of Scandinavian thought. This branch of our work can be promoted in various ways: by concerts where Scandinavian music is illustrated, by popular lectures, and perhaps best of all by encouraging the reading of English translations of the masterpieces of Scandinavian literature. To this end it would be well if those of our colleagues who are librarians would supply the reading public with bibliographies of those translations which at present exist, and some one of them might, on the basis of these bibliographies, provide a reading course in the history of each of the Scandinavian literatures, a course that would be of use in the study clubs that are so widespread in America. If I am not mistaken such a course would find a ready welcome.

We are, however, in need of more translations. There are, to be sure, quite a number of scattered things to be found in periodicals, if one knows where to find them, but in the average library one can find only a few, a very few, great names from Norway here and there a masterpiece from Swedish, and only rarely something from Danish. We have, for example, only a few translations from Jonas Lie, scattering things from Runeberg and Tegnér, and Holberg, whose comedies should be world classics, is unknown. There is no need in multiplying great names to increase the sense of what our culture has lost through ignorance of the literature of our neighbors. But I cannot pass by the old literature. Where could one find better reading for boys than in the sagas? They are strong, simple, healthy, and contain that element of heroism that so appeals to youth. Then we

¹See *Proceedings I*, page 8.

have no easily accessible translation of the Elder Edda, which contains some of the world's greatest poetry. Why can our society not take this matter definitely in hand? Secure a publisher and divide the work of translation among those who are interested. A little definite organization is all that is needed. It seems to me that we ought not to assume any financial responsibility; the publisher who receives our technical assistance ought to make the matter commercially successful. A publishing firm which undertakes such a series should be one having extensive connections with the American book trade; the publisher of the old series (saga translations), for we might have an old and a new series, ought by rights to be a publisher of text-books, with access to the channels which supply schools, since it is sincerely to be hoped that a large part of the demand for translations from the old literature may come from secondary schools and the higher grades of the grammar schools.

These books ought to be popular in the best sense of the word, books that could be on every pupil's book-shelf and on every family's reading table; therefore they should be inexpensive, clearly printed on good paper, and neatly bound. The language of the translations should be real English, as natural and simple as the original. Some of our translations have suffered in this regard: either they have been made by persons who have acquired English but imperfectly, and who write a stiff and bookish tongue, or by men who, like the incomparable William Morris, write an artificial, though it may be beautiful translation—English that disguises the literary qualities of the original, and to the uninitiated is nearly as difficult to understand. These are pitfalls to avoid. I can think of no more desirable Scandinavian cultural influence in America than a well executed series of translations from the ancient literature of the North. It would mean giving to America, particularly to young America, one of the richest treasures Scandinavia possesses.

Some of these sagas are already translated, but they do not circulate where we most wish them to be read. By far the greater part of them are either in expensive editions or published by foreign firms that are not readily accessible to the American book trade. I think existing translations would only in rare instances interfere with the sale of such a series. We might begin with the *Gunnlaugssaga* or the *Grittissaga* and add the *Njálssaga* and the *Egilssaga*, and finally the whole of the *Islendingasögur*. A good volume of selections from the kings' sagas might be made, as has recently been done in Germany, and certain of the *Fornaldarsögur* might well be translated. Then the Elder Edda awaits a translator who will give a convenient volume that is scholarly and accurate. This volume might include also the *Eddica Minora*. Some of the Scaldic poetry should be translated, enough to make a convenient little volume.

I shall leave to my colleagues who are more conversant with the modern period than I the suggestion of definite subjects for translation from that field. I realize also that choice would there be more difficult. In general it would seem that we might here begin with individual masterpieces, and proceed later to a more inclusive plan.

Scandinavian studies have ceased to rest upon a sentimental basis. We advocate them on account of their intrinsic merit. We are not satisfied with toleration in a modest corner, or having them provided only for youth of Scandinavian descent. We assert that the culture of the modern world would be distinctly poorer without them, and we wish to secure the interest not only of the learned or of those whose ancestors came from Scandinavia, but of the reading public of America. It is this work to which you are invited.

CHESTER N. GOULD.